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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a practical theological analysis of Baptist ecclesiology as a type of ‘democracy’ in which decision-making authority is ultimately vested in the whole membership of a given congregation. This Christian tradition is brought into theoretical dialogue with the movement in political theory known as radical democracy, which aims for a participatory politics centred upon the reception of difference and engagement in robust contestation. The question which will be addressed is how the encounter with radical democracy may help Baptists to re-interpret their ecclesiology in order to realise more capably the conviction that the divine will is discerned in a church’s collective deliberation.

Due to the diversity of both Baptist movements and radical-democratic theorists, this argument is restricted to specific contexts. First, the Baptists in view constitute the historical lineage that originated in seventeenth-century English Separatism and developed in the American South, which is denoted as the ‘southern Baptist’ tradition. Second, the conversation with radical democracy is limited to the writings of the American philosopher Romand Coles.

The first two chapters of the dissertation provide a descriptive framework for the theoretical discussion to follow. Chapter one presents a diachronic review of ‘democracy’ both as a rhetorical self-descriptor employed by southern Baptists as well as the shifting patterns of church polity that have instantiated this ideal in discrepant forms. Through an interdisciplinary excursion into the sociology of religion, the second chapter highlights research on diversity, conflict, and pastoral authority in congregations and weighs its implications for the validity of radical-democratic ecclesiology.

The next three chapters elucidate how Coles and southern Baptists have wrestled with the shared themes of philosophical/theological anthropology, contestation, and the nature of authority. Each chapter provides a summary of Baptist perspectives before juxtaposing Coles with a particular theologian who stands within the southern Baptist lineage. The similarities and differences in presupposition and theoretical development between Coles and Baptists are noted. Suggestions are made as to how Baptists might both incorporate Colesian insights as well as offer a theological critique in response.

The conclusion reviews both convergences and divergences, arguing that southern Baptists will find Coles’s radical democratic theory useful for retrieving and re-imagining their congregationalist ecclesiology. Suggestions for further research imagine possible avenues for continuing this critical dialogue. Baptists cannot simply assimilate radical democracy, however, given that their theological perspective privileges a teleological orientation over Coles’s vision of perennial and unresolved disagreement.